



Climate crisis

Racism at heart of US failure to tackle deadly heatwaves, expert warns

Jeff Goodell, author of *The Heat Will Kill You First*, found 'engine of planetary chaos' in travels from Antarctica to California

Nina Lakhani *Climate justice reporter*

🐦 [@ninalakhani](#)

Sun 6 Aug 2023 06.00 EDT

Racism is at the heart of the American government's failure to tackle the growing threat of deadly heatwaves, according to the author of an authoritative new book on the heating planet.

Jeff Goodell, an award winning climate journalist, told the Guardian that people of color - including millions of migrant workers who are bearing the brunt of record-breaking temperatures as farmhands, builders and delivery workers - are not guaranteed lifesaving measures like water and shade breaks because they are considered expendable.

In [The Heat Will Kill You First: Life and Death on a Scorched Planet](#), Goodell documents the tragic - and preventable - death of Sebastian Perez, a Guatemalan garden centre worker who collapsed and died in Portland, Oregon, on the first day of the brutal Pacific north-west heatwave in June 2021. In the US, there are no federal rules related to heat exposure for workers - indoors or out.

“To be blunt about it, the people most impacted by heat are not the kind of voting demographic that gets any politician nervous. They’re unsheltered people, poor people, agricultural and construction workers. People like Sebastian Perez are just seen as expendable. They’re not seen as humans who need to be protected. Racism is absolutely central to the government’s failure to protect vulnerable people.”

A couple of states have implemented heat exposure rules, yet last month in the middle of a heatwave, Texas governor Greg Abbott signed legislation prohibiting any city or county in the state from passing laws requiring shade and water breaks for outdoor workers. The vast majority of farmhands and construction workers in Texas are migrants from Mexico and Central America. “I mean, that is insane, and emblematic of the ‘cruelty is the point’ ideology in so much of our politics right now.”

According to Goodell, the risks faced by mostly Black and brown workers also reveal enduring elements of scientific racism previously used to justify forcing enslaved African people to do backbreaking farm work in the scorching south. “There were all kinds of crazy racist ideas like African people having thicker bones in their skulls that insulated them from heat. While nobody talks about that explicitly now, it is absolutely an undercurrent that having Mexicans pave roads in Austin in 107F [42C] is fine because they’re from Mexico, and used to it.

“It’s not just about these vulnerable people who can’t vote or the incompetence of the government, it is out and out racism.”

Goodell’s book is a comprehensive, compelling and timely examination of the fossil fuel-driven extreme heat that is transforming the planet and its inhabitants. Heat - in the atmosphere and the oceans - is driving every single climate impact, from rising sea level and melting glaciers to intensifying droughts, wildfires and superstorms. Heat is the “engine of planetary chaos” yet its dangers remain poorly understood.

Goodell’s reporting extends from Antarctica, California and the Arctic, to Paris, Chennai and the Great Barrier Reef, weaving stories of farmworkers, hikers, urbanites and polar bears with scientific analysis and political critique, and so connecting the dots between heat-related personal tragedies and the risks of global heating on the planetary scale.

His overarching goal was to make heat visible and make it feel urgent, which shouldn’t be that hard given that tens of thousands of people are already dying from extreme

heat every year. July was the hottest month ever recorded on the planet and at least two-thirds of Americans were under some sort of heat advisory.

Yet currently the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema) cannot declare or respond to extreme heat as a disaster like it can for a severe storm or tornado. And the messaging and warnings around heat are confused, with local weather service offices left to issue alerts or advisories as they see fit.

In part this is because heat-related risks largely depend where you are, who you are, and what you do - and the humidity factor. In Phoenix, 95F is an unremarkable summer's day, but a dangerous night temperature; in Minneapolis, 95F could prove deadly. But Goodell backs naming heatwaves - just like meteorologists name and rank storms - as a way of communicating the danger so that individuals and agencies take life-saving measures.

“We give names to children, we give names to dogs, to our fish ... it's how humans understand things. I understand that naming heatwaves is tricky, that it has complexities when you rank them, but we haven't ever tried it. Let's pilot it in a city like Miami or Austin, and if it doesn't help then fine, but there's a lot of evidence that suggests naming hurricanes really helps people understand the seriousness of what's coming.”

▲ Naming heatwaves is tricky ... but we haven't ever tried it Jeff Goodell

Some cities like Seville, Spain, are piloting a program to both rank and name heatwaves, but overall the international meteorological establishment isn't convinced.

In a chapter titled “Cheap cold air”, Goodell charts the history - and future - of air conditioning which enabled a migration south and in some ways shaped modern American politics as much as oil.

“Air conditioning is emblematic of all of the insanity and paradoxes of what we consider progress, both a technology of personal comfort and a technology of forgetting. It is such an American idea, such an American way of trying to solve a really complex problem with a techno fix ... it's emblematic of the inequalities of heat, the gap between the cool and the damned. The hotter it gets, the bigger the divide.”

Air conditioning is a climate catch-22.

Globally, there are more than 1bn single-room air conditioning units in the world right now - about one for every seven people on Earth - accounting for nearly 20% of the total electricity used in buildings, and hence a major contributor of the greenhouse gases making the planet hotter, driving up demand for aircon. If demand continues to

grow at the current pace, by 2050, there will probably be more than 4.5bn units, Goodell writes, making them as common as cellphones today. Meanwhile, tried and tested non-tech, carbon-neutral solutions dating back centuries have largely been dismissed or forgotten.

Heat, much like the Covid pandemic, exposes and exacerbates existing structural and racial inequalities in housing, wages, healthcare, mobility and access to solutions. One of Goodell's biggest fears is that the world will adapt to heat deaths much like it did with Covid. "Covid showed us how much death we're willing to tolerate. I am concerned that we'll simply adapt to the chaos and tragedy and accept 60,000 people dying every summer, and we'll forget that we created this climate and that we have control over it."

In an interview with Al Gore about 15 years ago, Goodell recalls agreeing with the former vice-president turned environmentalist's view that everybody eventually has an "oh shit" moment when something happens which wakes them up to the climate crisis. Not any more.

"There's not gonna be a kind of larger cultural moment, or a single thing that changes the political dynamic in a big way. We'll see incremental changes, two steps forward, one step back. This is trench warfare, everywhere, all the time."
